

TEACHING AND LEARNING ABOUT STUDENT GOAL SETTING IN A FIFTH-GRADE CLASSROOM

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Giving children more of a role in determining their learning goals is an important aspect of curriculum that language arts educators continue to strive for as we move into the 21st century. Based on classroom research, this article gives practical, well-grounded suggestions for making it happen.

I have accomplished a lot of reading goals. One is [to] read more. Some books I thought that I would never read, but I did.

—Natasha

I did start reading better books because I started going to the library more. I also concentrated on the book so I spent one hour [reading].

—Kimo

I think I have improved in my writing by reading other people's writing and seeing their mistakes. Then I would try to keep myself from making those same mistakes.

—Uilani

My [writing] pieces make sense now because I revise my work.

—Brittany

Students in Charlene Christenson's fifth-grade class discovered they could set goals for themselves and accomplish them. Looking back over the school year, they were able to explain what they did to help themselves and how it positively affected their work and their attitudes toward learning. We will explore the growth and development of these students and their teacher and what brought about changes in instruction and learning.

Recent discussions of the need for alternative forms of literacy assessment have stressed the importance of placing assessment in the hands of students and teachers (Farr & Tone, 1994; Harp, 1991). One reason for promoting student involvement in assessment is that it fosters students' ownership of literacy (Au, Scheu, & Kawakami, 1990). Ownership involves students' valuing their own ability to read and write and using reading and writing for their own purposes.

As students move from the primary to the upper elementary grades and beyond, they may become less motivated toward success in school. Differences between more and less academically able students become more pronounced, increasing the frustration of lower-performing students (Allington, 1991). Even those students with the skills needed for literacy may not have the will to use them (Winograd & Paris, 1988). Additionally, older children may receive less support than younger ones from both schools and families (Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991). Thus, there seems to be a great need for students in the upper elementary grades to acquire a sense of ownership to support their continued growth in literacy.

Charlene, a fifth-grade teacher, and Jackie, a curriculum developer, collaborated to create a classroom where student goal setting and self-evaluation were an integral part of the curriculum. Along the way, we learned how the teacher's own goal setting became a part of the process of change. To give readers more insight into Charlene's personal growth as a learner, we have included her reflections throughout this article.

The Students

The 18 students in this fifth-grade class attended a private school for Hawaiian children funded by a 100-year-old trust from a Hawaiian princess. The students were of part-Hawaiian ancestry and were speakers of Hawaii Creole English. They were primarily from working-class families and lived in both urban and rural areas.

The students had been admitted to the school through a lottery system and represented a range of academic abilities. In addition, some were highly mo-

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tivated and positive about attending this school, while others came reluctantly, attending because of family pressure. Many of those living in the rural districts had a 1-hour or longer bus ride to and from school, necessitating a very early start and a late ending to their school day.

Charlene's Experiences as a Student and a Teacher

I was fortunate to have supportive parents who valued education and stressed doing well in school. My Hawaiian father was an athlete and a physical education teacher, and my Chinese mother taught elementary school. Despite this background and support, I was not a confident writer or a strong reader.

My school experiences helped me understand the difficulties our Island children go through. The language we used outside of school and in informal settings was different from the language we were expected to learn and use in school. I struggled with the formal sentence structures and vocabulary of standard English. Reading and writing were simply things I did in school—I couldn't relate those skills to my life. Even in high school and college, I depended on others to help me with my papers.

As a university student, I took all the required education classes and studied hard. I learned a lot about what to teach children, but not much about how. Along with taking classes, I played on the uni-

versity's volleyball team. With the limited time I had left, I chose not to do much personal reading and writing, and I can't recall ever reflecting on my own learning.

When I became a teacher, I began to look more carefully at the issue of helping students develop a positive attitude toward reading and writing. I didn't want my students to go through the same struggles I did. I wanted to help them become competent readers and writers and develop a love of reading and writing.

Knowing that every student has individual strengths and weaknesses, and therefore different needs, concerned me. I thought back to something I had done as a volleyball coach to help my players' skills grow. I had each player write down individual goals as well as team goals they wanted to achieve for the season. During practices and games, I saw that the players were more focused and confident as they began to achieve some of their goals.

When I was approached by a curriculum developer to collaborate on an assessment project, I knew I wanted to do something similar for my students. Jackie and I discussed ways we could present goal setting and self-evaluation to the students and how we could maintain this process in my classroom. We also began exploring how goal setting fit with portfolio assessment. I launched the project at the beginning of the school year, Jackie observed, and we met frequently to talk and plan. Over time, I began to look more closely at how the content of the curriculum fit with the process of student learning.

Classroom Challenges in Student Goal Setting

In reviewing our classroom experiences with this goal-setting project, we decided to focus this article on some of the challenges we faced and how we dealt with them. We identified four major challenges: (1) helping students set appropriate goals, (2) creating an environment that supported the goal-setting process, (3) linking instruction to individual goals, and (4) helping students learn to evaluate their progress.

Helping Students Set Appropriate Goals

Early in September, Charlene introduced the goal-setting project to her class. She began with discussions about how students defined reading and writing, how they saw themselves as readers and writers, and how they felt about their accomplishments in these areas. Charlene also discussed goals in general, mak-

ing sure students knew what a goal was and could give examples from familiar domains such as sports. The students were then asked to set goals for themselves. Charlene encouraged sharing and discussion in the process of setting goals to enable students to get ideas from each other and to give them opportunities to sound out their ideas on a larger audience.

The students' lists revealed that many had difficulty setting appropriate goals. Some students chose to copy goals they had heard from other students, not considering how appropriate or meaningful those

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goals were for them. Many of the students tended to focus their goals on surface features of the reading and writing experience: reading faster, reading harder books, spelling words correctly when writing, having neater handwriting. Few goals focused on improving the content or organization of writing pieces; fewer addressed the need to understand what was read, to find personal meaning in it, or even to enjoy reading more.

Nohea's and Kawika's goals fit this pattern, and we use them as examples to show growth over the course of the school year. Nohea, an average student, had high expectations for herself and was rarely satisfied with her writing. She spent long periods of time during writers' workshop trying to work out how to express on paper what she wanted to say. She confessed she didn't like writing because "I am blank in my head of what to write." Her September writing goals stated: "One thing I need to improve on is my handwriting. I also need to improve on what I write about, where to put punctuations, and on spelling." Her reading goals listed: "Study my vocabulary so I know more words, read more carefully, read faster, read longer books, get better at reading, read more books."

Kawika, a low-average student, described what he disliked about reading: "When it is in the beginning [of the book]. Lots of words." His book selection strategy was to "just look in the fiction area

and cho[o]se any book. I read the beginning." His reading goals were: "to spend more time on book[s] then [than] Nintendo, read harder books, read faster, learn how to pernoce [pronounce] the words better, and read more often." His writing goals were linked to his reading: "In writing I would like to improve on my spelling because I can't right [write] very good. That's why I can't read some of my words in all my books. I need to learn how to write and read it better. Some times I can't spell hard words and can't read."

Charlene's Reflections on the Goal-Setting Process: *When speaking with some of the students and their parents, I understood why the students set many goals based on appearances. Parents frequently voiced concerns about messy handwriting, misspellings and grammatical errors in writing, and incorrect pronunciation in oral reading. While I felt these issues were important, I did not believe they should be parents' and students' main concern.*

I knew I needed to help students by modeling the kinds of goals I felt were important. On the day they made their goal lists for writing, I sat down with them to make mine. I soon realized that I was having a difficult time, just like the students. Many years of feeling insecure about my own writing came back to me. I realized I had little knowledge about my writing or insight about myself as a writer. I still had not done much personal writing, even though it was something I would ask students to do.

My own goal setting needed to be a learning experience for me, not just something I did to model for the students. I began to see that I could change and grow as a reader and writer, even now as an adult. To become a better and more confident writer, I knew I needed to write more often, something I always said I'd get to, but never did. The first goal I set was to write daily. My next goal was to use professional authors to help me improve my writing. I planned to read different genres and try to write in a variety of formats throughout the year.

I was concerned that I didn't have any good-quality personal writing pieces to share with my students. My previous frustrations with writing made me unsure of how successful I could be with my goals. Still, there were things I wanted to learn, and my students would see that I was willing to grow along with them.

Students who have learned to follow adult expectations are often at a loss when first asked to set standards for themselves or identify what they want to

learn (Siu-Runyan, 1991). Over time, Charlene helped students rethink their goals. She began by telling students about her early difficulties as a writer and sharing her own goals. In the months that followed, she explained how she was working toward those goals. For example, the class read biographies and wrote personal narratives that grew out of reflections of memorable times in their own lives. Charlene started a piece about a serious childhood bicycle accident, one that left her with scars. She shared examples of settings, dialogue, and personal feelings from the biographies she was reading and talked with the students about how she could use these ideas to improve her own piece.

Charlene also taught mini-lessons that emphasized aspects of reading and writing she felt were valuable: choosing books that hold your interest, looking for connections to your own life in biographies and novels, writing to reflect on your thinking and learning as you read, noticing author's styles and using them in your own writing, organizing information into paragraphs. She and the class often discussed individual differences and the need for each person to discover what was important to him or her. She set aside time for students to reflect on their learning (our fourth challenge) and set new goals if they chose to.

While Nohea pursued her goals of reading faster and reading longer books, she also seemed to be influenced by Charlene's lessons and discussions. In a mid-October review of her reading goals, she added a new goal: "See if I can make a little bit more sense in my head when I read." Jarena had a similar experience. A low reader, she set goals in September that reflected her understanding of what "good readers" do and her desire to be a good reader like some of her classmates: "I would like to read faster and get the flow. I would really want to try and read harder books than I can." By mid-October, she set a new goal for herself which better reflected her needs: "I have to understand what the book is about and try to write down some notes about it."

Creating an Environment to Support the Goal-Setting Process

We encountered our second challenge early in the school year. As we talked about how students could be helped to accomplish their diverse goals, we saw the need for a classroom structure that would give students many opportunities to work toward the goals they had set for themselves. From our profes-

sional readings, we decided to try to apply the critical elements Jane Hansen (1987) described for successful reading-writing programs: time, choice, responsibility, structure, and community.

Charlene's Reflections on Creating a Supportive Environment: *I realized that having students set and work toward individual goals was going to be a challenge for me as a teacher. Not only did I have to be very organized to keep up with knowing individual needs and progress, but I also had to learn to let go and give the students more control and greater responsibility for their learning.*

At first I was uncomfortable with the idea of not being "in control" and having all the answers. However, I felt that getting students involved in learning the processes of reading and writing would be more meaningful than the traditional textbook lessons I could have taught.

My time with my students was very important to me. Looking at my class schedule, I thought to myself, Where am I ever going to fit in time for students to work on their goals? I knew if I truly valued setting and working toward goals, I needed to set aside time for these things to happen. I needed to trust that students would use the time I gave them and that I could keep up with their individual progress as learners.

Charlene decided to make sure that within the readers' workshop and writers' workshop, students had time to pursue their personal goals. Although there were regularly scheduled activities (mini-lessons, whole-class sharing, small-group discussions for reading, writing conferences), some open blocks of time enabled students to think about and work on their goals. This flexible structure also gave Charlene time to observe her students, interact with them as individuals, and focus her instruction on their needs.

The students were given choices about what and how they would read and write. Students selected their own books for independent reading, chose from among the books offered for literature study groups, managed many of their own small-group discussions, and wrote open-ended journal responses in addition to responding to some general questions given by the teacher. They also selected their own topics for writing, controlled the content and length of their pieces, and determined formats for publishing and sharing. These choices allowed students to consider their options and select materials and experiences to help them reach their goals.

Students were invited to take greater responsibility for their own learning and were held accountable for using their time to achieve their goals. At the end of readers' or writers' workshop, students were often asked to share what they had accomplished in working toward a current goal and how they felt about it. Other students' responses to one child's sharing were opportunities to develop a community of support for each other and each other's goals. Students also maintained their own portfolios, selecting work they thought reflected their progress toward their goals.

With these changes in the classroom setup, we began to see benefits. Students started to attend to their goals more. In a group discussion, Kawika shared that he was doing better on his goal of spending more time reading than playing Nintendo. "I read in class all the time now. And at night, first I do my homework, then I read for 20 minutes, and then I take a shower and eat and go to bed." "What about Nintendo?" Charlene asked. "I only play on weekends," he explained.

Other students, while not yet feeling that they had accomplished their goals, addressed the challenge of working toward them. In a class discussion, Kalani admitted that his handwriting was getting sloppier, despite his having set a goal to improve it. "What does that tell you?" Charlene asked. "I have to work on it some more," Kalani responded. Uilani agreed with him, saying, "You can't just say, 'That's my weak point, so I won't try to get better.'"

Linking Instruction to Individual Goals

After Christmas vacation, we again assessed our progress with the project. The students now had time to work on their goals, a classroom structure to support the goal-setting process, choices about how they would work, and increased responsibility for their accomplishments. Many students were making progress toward their goals. They could explain why they felt they were improving and point to evidence of their success, and we agreed with their evaluations.

Unfortunately, we felt that not all students had joined the community of learners. Some still seemed uninvolved with their own learning. In part, their focus on more general goals (reading harder books, writing better stories) didn't give them any sense of how to progress. Also, they didn't seem to understand how the information they were being taught connected to their goals, and there was little evidence of improvement. These students clearly needed more guidance and direction.

Charlene's Reflections on Linking Instruction to Individual Goals: *I was continuing to learn from the students. Their goals became the focus for my mini-lessons, conferences, and group discussions. But I still needed to make clearer connections between their goals and my teaching. As I continued to explore my own goals, I was refining my understanding of what makes writing powerful, engaging, and worth reading.*

I knew my first goals had been quite general, and like the students I needed to be more precise about what I wanted to improve and how I would try to achieve it. I added another writing goal to my list: to organize my writing better by writing a more detailed plan before I started to draft. I refined my reading goal to analyze other authors' techniques and use what I was learning from them in my own writing. As I worked on these goals, I saw how my next pieces of writing were clearer and more focused. I knew I wanted to show students, especially those who were not yet feeling successful, how to look more closely at applying what they were being taught.

We decided that individual projects would be good vehicles for helping students make better links between goals and learning. The students had already completed several projects related to books they were reading, and they had written and published personal narratives, fiction, and research. Tying individual goals to new reading projects or writing pieces could make the goal-setting process more concrete and more manageable. Students would have a period of time to try to achieve certain goals and a specific product to showcase their successes.

When the next project—writing a legend based on a study of Native Americans—was assigned, students were asked to review their goals and identify those they would try to meet over the course of the project. Of course, they could also set new goals. In earlier projects, Charlene had established the standards. Now the students were asked to set standards for their goals. Those students who seemed less successful at achieving goals began to see connections between their goals and the lessons they were learning.

Nohea was one such example. In the fall and early spring, she continued to focus on handwriting and spelling as writing goals, but not on the content of her pieces. She still felt dissatisfied with her writing progress. In a March interview, she said setting goals was "... okay. I wouldn't do it if I didn't have to, but it's okay." She did, however, have a new goal: "I know what I want to achieve. It's making

my writing better than it was before. I want to work on what I'm writing about and make it a better story."

For the legend project, Charlene used Nohea's goal as the basis for mini-lessons about using interesting language, literary style, symbolism, and author's message. During these lessons, Charlene named Nohea and others as students whose goals could be met by applying this information to their writing. In addition, Charlene met individually with Nohea. Nohea was intrigued by what she had learned from reading other legends and from a class visitor who helped the students make clay pots in the ancient Anasazi style. She wanted to include information about firing pottery in her legend. Charlene worked with Nohea to help her organize her ideas on a story-planning sheet.

Nohea's piece told the story of a young girl who made a clay pot. "In those days, whenever someone made a clay pot, it was never used. It was never used because it would fall apart whenever it got wet." Later in her story, there was a fire. "Every-

(Nohea) stated that what she liked best about this piece was "how creative it is. It is creative because I combined real life with something that never existed."

thing that was in the *pueblo bonito* burned, including the pot. The fire burned for 15 to 16 hours. The Indians tried to put out the fire, but they couldn't because water was very scarce in this very dry land. So finally when the fire was done, the Indian girl saw her pot and thought the pot was very sturdy. The fire helped the pot get sturdy because of the heat in the fire. It dried up and hardened the clay."

Nohea's evaluation of her legend reflected a new pride in her work. She stated that what she liked best about this piece was "how creative it is. It is creative because I combined real life with something that never existed." The next project was to write a book about an aspect of American history. Nohea chose to invent a diary of a fictitious traveler who visited several Native American tribes at the time of European exploration. She did research, wrote a plan, and revised to improve her story. Her piece was well-written and one of the most creative in the class. In

her May evaluation of her writing accomplishments, Nohea wrote, "The ideas to a story come more easily." She no longer felt that she didn't have topics to write about, and she had discovered ways to improve her writing.

Helping Students Learn to Evaluate Their Progress

All through the school year, we looked for opportunities to address an ongoing challenge: how to help students reflect on and evaluate their progress. Students were reminded to add work to their portfolios that they felt showed their progress as readers and writers. Every 4 to 6 weeks, Charlene provided class time for students to look through their portfolios, reflect on their work, evaluate their progress, and relate it to their goals. Students filled in self-evaluation forms that were kept in their portfolios. Small- and large-group discussions were held after these periodic portfolio reviews to let students share their accomplishments, support each other's progress, and give each other ideas on further ways to improve.

Charlene's Reflections on Self-Evaluation: As students learned to evaluate their progress, I was encouraged to evaluate my own. I sat down with the class during self-reflection sessions and thought about my own growth. I recognized that I had accomplished some of my goals, but not others. I was reading different types of literature and using other authors as resources to help me with my own writing. I was doing more personal reading and writing, but not daily. After evaluating my progress, I decided my goal of daily personal reading and writing was unrealistic. I was growing as a reader and writer despite the lack of daily experiences. I changed my goal to weekly personal reading and writing.

Setting and accomplishing goals not only helped me learn how to be a better reader and writer, but it also gave me more confidence. That confidence helped my teaching. I felt I now understood and could teach students about different writing styles and techniques. In addition, I could talk with conviction about personal growth as a reader and writer.

Kawika's consistent focus on his reading goals lead to accomplishments which he chronicled in his self-evaluations. At the end of September, he completed a book project after reading a biography of Babe Ruth. In his evaluation, Kawika noted that he had already accomplished one of his reading goals: "To read harder books. [I read] the encyclopedia."

Despite the challenging vocabulary in the encyclopedia entry about Babe Ruth, Kawika read it eagerly and compared the facts he had already learned in the biography to the ones in the article. He was able to combine information from both sources for a class presentation. In a November evaluation of his reading of a historical novel about Christopher Columbus, he noted, "I read more careful[ly]." In fact, his careful reading had allowed him to share detailed information and well-supported opinions with his literature study group.

By January, Kawika could see a definite change in his reading habits. He noted, "One of my reading goals I accomplished was spending more time on reading. I have been doing it for a long time, but I feel I still have to work on it." He also recognized that he was reading faster, another goal. In March, as he read *Robinson Crusoe* (Defoe, 1899) and *Sign of the Beaver* (Speare, 1983), Kawika continued to focus on reading faster and understanding the content. In May, he reflected on his accomplishments: "I have accomplis[h]ed 2 goals. One was to read faster. All year I was reading slow, but now I am reading faster because I read a lot of long books. The other was to understand what I am reading. I did that by stop[p]ing at every chapter and think[ing] of what I read. My journal has really helped me accomplish my goals because I need to write things down in my journal from my novel."

Interviews done in the spring revealed that over 80% of the students felt good about the goal-setting process. Their reasons showed that they valued both process and results:

Uilani: When I set them, I really notice them.

Iwa: Because you know what to do. You can accomplish your goals and do better.

Minei: You learn how to achieve your goals, and that would be a good thing in life to have.

Joycelyn: Then I know I can write better stories, get better grades, and people know what I'm talking about.

Tina: Because when you write neater and make sense, other people like to read it.

Conclusions and Further Reflections

How did setting and working toward individual goals aid these students in their growth as learners? First, setting goals helped students focus on and apply strategies and skills they already had. We found evidence that some students were choosing to use familiar strategies to pursue their goals, something they apparently had not opted to do in the past. For

example, one of Kimo's writing goals in September stated: "Sometimes I don't do all of the writing steps, so I need to learn to do them all the time."

Kimo was a bright, capable student who had been involved with the writing process since kindergarten. He certainly knew "all the writing steps." His writing showed creativity, but he was often impatient with revising and careless about editing. By the end of the school year, he realized he had changed. In his May reflection, he wrote: "Before I was getting C's in writing, and now I am getting A's and B's by working harder and not rushing."

Kiana also made gradual changes over the school year by focusing on her goals and applying what she already knew how to do. In September, she revealed: "I never liked reading and a lot of my friends like to read and when I go over to their house I never want to read and instead I just look out the window. . . . I have to get more interested in the books." When listing her writing goals, she stated: "Another reason why I need to improve is I don't read enough! Then I don't have any experiences." In January, she saw some improvement in her reading habits and attitudes: "When I add up my reading logs, I think to myself that I could read more. Because sometimes I am so lazy that I read only 5 pages. But sometimes I get really interested in the book." One day Kiana reported to the class that her mother was so happy to see her reading on her own at home, she had crept up and taken a photograph. By May, Kiana felt she had reached her goal. "I have gotten better on get-

. . . there is a focus or concentration that the goal-setting process seems to bring to students', and in this case to their teachers', learning.

ting interested in books now. I did some of it by looking more at the book and reading the back. Like *Encyclopedia Brown* books. I used to think that *Encyclopedia Brown* books are boring, but now I want the whole collection!"

The second way the goal-setting process helped students was by connecting newly learned strategies and skills to students' needs as readers and writers. Nohea learned to incorporate factual knowledge into her fiction pieces in a way that enhanced the storyline. Her goal to "mak[e] my writing better than it was before" led her to apply the techniques of a

writer's craft being taught and to seek out other ways to improve her writing beyond a focus on handwriting, punctuation, and spelling. Kawika's goal to spend more time reading was supported as he acquired new strategies for choosing books of interest to him and learned skills for dealing with challenging vocabulary. His reading became more fluent, and stories became more meaningful to him.

We believe that part of the success of this goal-setting process lies in the increased motivation students feel to meet goals they set themselves. In addition, there is a focus or concentration that the goal-setting process seems to bring to students', and in this case to their teachers', learning. As we continue our explorations of student goal setting and evaluation, we will keep looking for ways to make connections among our teaching, our curriculum, and what students determine are their needs as learners.

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AEPL CONFERENCE TO EXPLORE SPIRITUALITY IN EDUCATION

"Feeding the Mind, Nurturing the Spirit," a conference/symposium for K-college educators interested in topics such as holistic learning and spirituality in education, will be held at Snow Mountain Ranch, Colorado, Friday August 11-Monday August 14, 1995. James Moffett, whose most recent book is *The Universal Schoolhouse: Spiritual Awakening through Education*, will be the main presenter. The program, sponsored by NCTE's Assembly on Expanded Perspectives on Learning (AEPL), will include small group discussions, interactive teaching demonstrations, and participatory sessions involving meditation, guided imagery, body wisdom, the role of feelings and emotions in teaching and learning, and other topics. Total cost of the conference per person is \$329 (multiple occupancy), \$399 (double occupancy), or \$499 (single occupancy). The fee includes registration, lodging, and meals for the event. For a registration form and further information, contact Dick Graves, Curriculum and Teaching, Auburn University, AL 36849 (205/844-6889).
